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WHAT IS GOOD ABOUT THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES.

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THE TEACHING OF MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES (FRENCH, GERMAN, ITALIAN, RUSSIAN, SPANISH, AND ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE) IN THE AMERICAN PUBLIC ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS HAS BEEN REVOLUTIONIZED SINCE WORLD WAR II, WITH THE DEMAND FOR NEAR-NATIVE CONTROL OF A SECOND LANGUAGE FOR COMMUNICATION. THE PUBLIC FELT THAT THIS NEED MUST BE MET, ALONG WITH MORE TRADITIONAL LITERARY OBJECTIVES, AND WAS WILLING TO PAY FOR IT. RECENT TECHNICAL BREAKTHROUGHS HAVE MADE LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING MORE SCIENTIFIC. BECAUSE OF MEDICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH, PRACTICE AND ANALOGY HAVE BEEN FOUND TO BE JUST AS NECESSARY IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING AS IN THE LEARNING OF A NATIVE TONGUE. DESCRIPTIVE LINGUISTICS HAS CLARIFIED WHAT A LANGUAGE IS, AND HOW IT CAN BE ANALYZED, PRESENTED, AND DRILLED. ELECTRONICS AND RECORDINGS AID THE CLASSROOM AND THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY. ALL OF THESE ADVANCEMENTS HAVE RESULTED NOT ONLY IN BETTER-TRAINED AND MORE PROFESSIONAL TEACHERS BUT ALSO IN MORE EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE PROGRAMS ON ALL LEVELS. THIS ARTICLE IS A REPRINT FROM "A TEACHERS COLLEGE JOURNAL," OCTOBER 1964. (AF)

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What Is Good About the Teaching and Learning of Modern Foreign Languages

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● THESE FEW OBSERVATIONS are intended to point up what is good in present-day American modern-foreign-language education. They suggest its past, its present, and its promise. By "modern foreign language" is meant not only the Western tongues commonly taught in our schools (French, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish), but also English taught as a foreign language here and abroad. The so-called "exotic" or "uncommon" languages (such as Arabic or Chinese), while very important, do not figure in this discussion focused on the American public elementary and secondary school. Another very important segment of the foreign-language field, that of the classical languages (primarily Latin, but also Ancient Greek and Hebrew) cannot be adequately treated in this brief space. "Modern foreign language(s)" is abbreviated below to MFL or MFLs.

Ten or fifteen years ago there was effective MFL teaching and learning in this country. There always has been. But it was rare and spotted about, and the students who achieved real competence were only those few lucky enough to have gift and perseverance, or to be enrolled in an outstanding program, or both. Their number was pitifully small. For the great majority of American children, MFL learning was either a closed door or a frustrating, partial experience of a year or two. The main stream of American education was not about to include MFL learning in any great strength or quantity.

In 1964 all that has changed, or is changing rapidly. There is in progress a "180-degree turn" in the MFL field at all levels of instruction from elementary to graduate school and in training and retraining adults. Its philosophy is sound and its results are useful, serving to establish direct communication between one human being and another through the spoken and written word. In good programs, every beginner has meaningful, useful experience with the MFL, large percentages of the beginners eventually reach some competence in the spoken word, and a somewhat smaller group goes on to mastery of the written language and to the study of its literature.

The underlying causes for the revolution in the MFL field have been first, the ever-increasing need since the beginning of World War II for Americans—tens of thousands more each year—with near-native control of a second language for communication. Second, the increasing public demand that this need be met—while the traditional literary objectives of MFL study be maintained and furthered. Third, the public's willingness to pay the cost: witness, for example, the millions of dollars voted by Congress to implement the MFL titles of the National Defense Education Act of 1958, and by State and local governments to improve their MFL programs.

But needs cannot be met without adequate techniques. Fortunately for the national good and for private satisfaction, several recent technical break-throughs have combined to move the teaching and learning of MFLs from the occult realms of "art" and "gift" to those of scientific fact and well-defined professional know-how. In the past decade the accumulated wisdom of generations of great language teachers has been combined with the findings of medical and psychological research. As a result we know how the infant and child learns to use his first (native) language: through abundant practice and the power of analogy (*not analysis!*). In the similar but quite different situation of learning a second language, we find again that abundant practice and the use of analogy are essential to building up good speech, reading, and writing habits. Analysis of the habits comes later. The young and vigorous science of descriptive linguistics has made clear to us what a language is, and how its sounds, structure, and vocabulary can be ana-

lyzed and systematically presented and drilled for dependable progress toward near-native control. The science of electronic communication and recording has given us the long-play phonograph disc, the tape recorder, and the many other technical advantages of the electronic MFL classroom and the language laboratory.

From the foregoing it is apparent that one must speak not of a revolution in the MFL field, but of a number of interdependent revolutions: motivational, financial, linguistic, methodological, technical. When all are effectively harnessed together, each made to contribute its best to the common cause, and none allowed to dominate the field, we get a kind of second-language teaching and learning that responds fully to the needs of the hour both public and private. It holds great promise for all MFL programs at all levels of instruction, for all age groups, the country over. In many localities such programs already exist; many others are on the way, some as a result of State-wide effort.

Of what does such a program consist? *First*, it offers to every learner, at whatever age level, *a competent, well-trained, professionally-minded teacher.* Such a teacher does not need to be highly "gifted," any more than a good doctor or dentist is primarily gifted; the essentials are that he be well selected and thoroughly trained in his profession, and that he take professional and personal pride in keeping up with the advances in his field. (Here, I regret to say, must be sounded a negative warning: the teacher-training institutions of this country have not yet even begun to turn out in the numbers needed the kind of MFL teacher just described.)

Second, it offers to children below the age of 10 or 11 *an early beginning and a long sequence* of MFL practice and study, a minimum of about 9 years, so that upon graduation from secondary school they are in near-native control of their second language, understanding, speaking, reading and writing it with a facility comparable to their control of English, reading and understanding its literature, able to deal effectively and sympathetically with representatives of the culture it embodies.

Third, it offers to *others* in the community, *adolescents and adults who have not had the advantage of an early start, the opportunity to practice and study a second language as effectively as possible in a short time.* The sequences, however, are long enough to produce tangible results: for high school students, a minimum of 4 years; for adults, concentrated and productive work, not aimless "conversational" courses lasting a few vague weeks. Both adolescents and adults, well motivated and well taught, can be depended on to use good home-study materials such as the take-home phonograph disc. But their performance seldom equals that of the student who began his MFL in a good elementary-school program.

Fourth, it offers to every student, at every learning level and every age level, *interesting, effective, scientifically designed practice and study materials* taking him from where he is to where he is going in the most efficient and [illegible] manner possible. Such materials are already on the market. They are recorded on disc and tape, printed in books and workbooks, supported by inexpensive visual aids (charts, slides, films, etc.) and above all are simple and clear for teacher and student alike.

Fifth, it offers to every student at every learning level *optimum use of the equipment* necessary to carry out his program most effectively. This means first of all an uncrowded, quiet classroom where he and his teacher can work efficiently and in comfort. Secondly, the classroom (an electronic classroom in this case), the laboratory, and the student's home-study environment have in them the equipment necessary for the efficient machine drill so saving of the teacher's time and energy and so effective in building up the habit patterns constituting acceptable language behavior, oral or written. By "optimum" use of equipment is meant "most efficient," not necessarily "longest" or "hardest." Two negative examples, by way of illustration: (1) For lack of machine drill, a teacher wears out his patience and his voice, and uses up precious class time teaching control of a verb tense that the students could learn in a laboratory period or two, or at home with a disc. (2) A teacher, unaware of the proper function of machine drill, keeps bright students grinding away at the same drill long after they have mastered it, leaving them bored and disgusted when they should have spent much of that time reading or listening to a new and interesting story and talking with the teacher about it in the target language.

One more word about the MFL teacher, whose importance is surely as great as in other disciplines—and probably even greater, since in many communities it is he and he alone who represents personally the foreign language, culture, and literature taught and learned there. A brief decade ago he was all too often primarily a teacher of biology or English with a vague "minor" in Spanish or French, teaching the latter because there was no other way out. Today, thanks to the needs and developments mentioned above, and to decades of planning and work by his colleagues in the profession, he is much more likely to be a fully-equipped MFL professional, intent on MFL teaching as a career, and proud of it, and backed by an increasingly effective and watchful complex of national, state, and local MFL professional organizations.

Yes, MFL education in the United States is out of doldrums of the 1940's and early 1950's. It is helping the English-speaking Americans, old and young, to further their own interests and those of their country. It is doing this by helping them and their opposite numbers, speakers of languages other than English here and abroad, to break out of their monolingual shells and to participate in the lives and thoughts of those who once were "foreign."